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ABSTRACT

A writer's audience may sometimes be actual readers (real individuals) or implied readers (the reader role the text imposes). Intended readers are individuals the writer expects will actually read the text while the addressed readers are those to whom the writer directs his or her comments--an important distinction in academic writing. For example, a student may write a paper with his or her sociology instructor as the intended audience, but with other English teachers as the addressed audience. Successful student writers understand the need to have a good grasp of who their addressed reader is and to choose their tone and rhetorical strategies based on their sense of this addressed reader. They know that the addressed reader may be someone different from the intended reader, and they have developed strategies for temporarily forgetting their intended readers in favor of the addressed reader when appropriate. Writers' awareness of actual readers leads them to analyze the audience, but awareness of implied readers leads them to continually reread and mold the emerging text to evoke the desired audience reactions, expectations, and attitudes. Community college freshmen appear to know little about how to create and sustain any purposeful role for a reader. These students must be shown how effective writers create an implied reader as they write--a role for the reader to adopt while reading. Writing for a more general audience, although sometimes more difficult, may lead writers to explore the material more deeply. Writing for a narrower audience may stifle any tendency to achieve new insights or to find more complex integrations of the material at hand. (A model of actual and implied readers and case study materials are included.) (HTH)

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AUDIENCES, IMAGINED AND REAL: STUDENTS' COMPOSING STRATEGIES

Robert G. Roth

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Audiences, Imagined and Real: Students' Composing Strategies

When we speak of audience awareness to student writers, we tell them they must remember the reader. But just who do we mean by "the reader"? Most composition handbook discussions of audience tend to focus on the student's need to decide who his intended readers are, to assess the needs and expectations of those readers, and to guage the effects of his words on them. Such discussions seem to consider only this intended reader--the real-life individual or individuals external to the text whom the writer expects will read his text. I have found, however, that it is often necessary to distinguish several other reader categories.

The chart on the first page of the handout (see 2-page handout appended to this paper) represents the audience model I have in mind. I am suggesting that by audience we may sometimes mean actual readers--real individuals external to the text whom the writer can analyze beforehand--and sometimes implied readers--the reader role the text asks any reader to take on as she reads. (I'll be discussing this concept of the "implied reader" more fully later on.) As the chart shows, these two categories--actual readers and implied readers--may be further subdivided. Actual readers may be either intended readers--the people the writer actually expects to read her text--or addressed readers--the people the writer explicitly directs her comments to, her "rhetorical audience." As we shall see, these are not always the same. Similarly, implied readers may be of three types. The revised reader is a single real person but redefined in light of the writer's purposes. The composite reader refers to a reader role the writer creates out of selected attributes of several different classes of readers. Finally, the projected reader points to a reader role that is a projection of both the writer's ideal self and of the attitudes she wishes to find out there in her readers. It is akin to the audience Yeats speaks of in his poem "The Fisherman":

> Maybe a twelvemonth since
> Suddenly I began,
> In scorn of this audience,
> Imagining a man,
> And his sun-freckled face,
> And grey Connemara cloth,
> Climbing up to a place
> Where stone is dark under froth,
> And the down-turn of his wrist

When the flies drop in the stream;
A man who does not exist,
A man who is but a dream;
And cried, 'Before I am old
I shall have written him one
Poem maybe as cold
And passionate as the dawn.'

Yeats analyzed this audience, but first he had to create him--and he could create him only in the process of writing many poems.

I won't have time to discuss in detail all of the audience sub-categories I've posited. Rather, I would like first to discuss some of the implications of the distinction between "intended readers" and "addressed readers." Then I will return to the major distinction--that between "actual readers" and "implied readers."

As I have said, "intended readers" are individuals the writer, as he composes, expects will actually read what he is writing. "Addressed readers," however, are people the writer directs all his comments to, whether he expects them to actually read what he has written or not. This distinction is especially relevant to writing done in an academic context. I remember writing a paper on Basil Bernstein's socio-linguistic theories for a sociology course I was taking in the Rutgers Graduate School of Education. I wanted to write about Bernstein, but I didn't feel comfortable directly addressing my sociology professor--a man who had been studying Bernstein much longer than I had. Instead, I ended up addressing other English teachers, trying to show them some of the implications Bernstein's theories might have for the teaching of writing and reading. Yet as I wrote I would frequently return in my mind to my intended reader--my sociology teacher--thinking about how much sense my interpretations and arguments would make to him. To manage both reader categories simultaneously is no easy task. Yet student writers may need to learn how to do this if they are to write successful academic prose. (Whether they ought to be asked to write academic prose is another question, but it is one the importance of which I certainly do not mean to ignore or minimize.)

My attention was first drawn to the need to distinguish between the intended reader and the addressed reader during a case study I did of a successful community college freshman writer named Laura. As part of the study, Laura wrote a persuasive essay that ended up taking the form of a letter addressed to an ex-friend of hers--the

"Letter to a Lost Friend" that is on the second page of the handout. In the interview that followed, it became clear that virtually all the choices Laura made regarding diction, tone, and rhetorical strategy were based on her sense of how her words would affect the ex-friend. Laura imagined the friend as actually reading the letter, considering how the written words would sound to her, how they would affect her. Yet, later in the interview, it also became clear that Laura never intended that ex-friend to read the letter--not even when she first began planning it. Rather, it was intended for me to read and, if she decided it was good enough, for her present English teacher. This was clear not only from Laura's comments during the interview and from the writing situation (she knew that I would be reading it), but also from the fact that late in the process Laura added the word "imaginary" (toward the end of the sixth paragraph) with me in mind and not her friend. When this late addition was discussed, it became clear that the word was meant to clarify a point the "friend" could not possibly need to be reminded of. Then Laura commented: "The 'imaginary' is from the third day, when I reread it. . . . So I was rereading it also in my head as you would be reading it, but when I wrote the essay, I just wrote it to her." What Laura did, then, was to largely exclude consideration of the intended reader (me) in favor of her rhetorically-appropriate audience--her addressed reader--until late in the composing process. This allowed her to write a consistent, rhetorically-balanced piece. Then, when she came close to the time of letting me see it, she allowed herself to think more about me as the audience and to make some minor changes appropriate to that new audience, the intended reader.

This example suggests two points. First, successful student writers understand the need to have a good grasp of who their addressed reader is and to choose their tone and rhetorical strategies based on their sense of this addressed reader. More important, they know that the addressed reader may be someone different from the intended reader, the person (or people) who will actually read what they have written. And this leads to the second point. Successful student writers have developed strategies for temporarily forgetting their intended readers in favor of the addressed reader, while still being able to return to a consideration of the intended reader at other, more appropriate stages of the composing process.

My experience with remedial writing students suggests that they do not know how to manage a writing situation in which they must take into consideration both the addressed reader and a different intended reader. Laura, though, knew that she could write her letter in such a way as to draw my interest and my approval while not directly addressing me at all. And, to some extent, she knew when to forget me as her audience--and when to recall me.

As I have suggested, this issue is especially salient in the school writing situation, for students are often asked to write for their teachers on subjects about which the teacher is an expert. If, for example, a student is asked to write about Hamlet for her Shakespeare professor--a woman who has for years studied, taught, and written about this and other plays by Shakespeare--does the student write only with this teacher-as-audience in mind? I think she would be wiser not to, even though she knows that this teacher is her intended reader. In this regard, James Britton speaks of the difficulty students may have managing a "double-audience system in which behind one audience stands the spectre of another." Most of us can probably recall a time when we found ourselves telling a student something to this effect: "As you write, don't assume I know all about this subject. I do know about it, but you must explain your thinking more fully." Or we may have said simply, "Your reader needs to know more about this idea," and left the poor student wondering just who the devil her "reader" was supposed to be. I suspect that, at least in some cases, we may have to start by showing students that they may have both addressed readers and intended readers and then helping them learn how and when to consider each. Telling students that their reader is the teacher--as, for example, the latest edition of the Random House Handbook does--doesn't help much. Rather, it just reinforces something students already know all too well.

So much for "actual readers." Now what about the "implied reader"? Rather than referring to people external to the text, the implied reader points to a reader role implicit in the text itself--to the role the text in effect asks any reader to temporarily take on as she reads. The writer's awareness of actual readers leads her to audience analysis--the preliminary assessment of the needs and characteristics of her readers. But her awareness of her implied reader leads her to a continual rereading of her

emerging text in an attempt to mold it so that it will evoke the reactions, expectations, and attitudes she wishes her readers to adopt as they read.

By pointing out the existence of this "implied reader," I am suggesting that writers must always to some extent create rhetorically-appropriate stances for their readers to adopt. In an article entitled "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction" (1975), Walter Ong suggests that the fictional audience a writer creates may be unrelated to any actual reader except insofar as this reader is required to "play the role in which the author has cast him, which seldom coincides with his role in the rest of actual life." It is the author who does the casting--and his purposes in writing determine the roles he chooses. Having a sense of audience, then, is not only a matter of the writer adapting his purpose to his readers; it is also a matter of the writer knowing how to get his readers to adapt themselves to his purpose.

To do this, a writer must be able to accomodate her intended readers, but she must also be able to somehow create as she writes an audience implicit in the text--what Douglas Park describes as a "set of suggested or evoked attitudes, interests, reactions, conditions of knowledge which may or may not fit with the qualities of actual readers." Thus, when we speak of a student writer's sensitivity to her audience, we are speaking not only of her ability to assess the needs and attitudes of her readers, but also of her ability to anticipate and actually to create her reader's responses. Audience awareness ultimately involves shaping one's text in such a way that it will generate a potentially new and very possibly unaccustomed set of attitudes and assumptions in any reader who becomes engaged by that text. Such shaping depends on the writer's sense of her implied audience as much as on her awareness of her actual readers. I do not mean, however,

to minimize the importance of a writer's awareness of her actual readers. Surely student writers will not write well if they are unable to "decenter," to be aware of the needs of their readers. But they will also be limited if they are unable to imagine an appropriate though hypothetical audience--an implied reader--and to control what they write in such a way as to make it likely that their readers will temporarily accept the audience role they have been invited to take on.

For me this issue is related both to a student's ability to define for himself his own purposes in writing and to his ability to write for a broad, public audience. In the writing done by the community college freshmen I have studied so far, I have seen relatively little to indicate that they know how to create and sustain a purposeful role for a reader to take on or that they can effectively manage an essay addressed to a relatively general audience. Yet composition handbooks often tell students that ordinarily they should address a "general audience." The Harbrace Handbook, Ninth Edition, for example, gives just this advice and then goes on to define this amorphous group--the "general audience"--as "educated and intellectually curious adults with a wide variety of political, ethnic, religious, and social backgrounds." How is one to analyze such an audience and come up with anything more than a few, relatively useless generalizations? Yet here the handbook authors have just told the student that he must evaluate his audience before he can determine the tone and attitude he will convey in writing--and that he must first answer such questions as "What is the attitude of the audience toward the topic?" Such contradictory advice may leave students more confused than ever. What is called for is to show students how effective writers create an implied reader as they write--a role for the reader to adopt as he reads.

The closest my case study subject, Laura, came to doing this was when she wrote the opening to an essay she called "Is Next Year Ever Going to Come to MCC?" Here she was consciously trying to write for a broader audience than she had addressed in her earlier "Letter to a Lost Friend." She had written out three different possible openings and later, while rereading them, she suddenly turned to me and asked, "Does it have to be to a person?"--meaning, I suppose, "Do I have to address any one actual person?" Without waiting for an answer, she reread the three openings again, decided she liked one better, crossed out another one, and then discovered that she could combine the other two into an effective opening:

> "It'll change next year." "I heard next year they're gonna change it." Next year, next year, next year; is next year ever going to come to M.C.C.?
>
> Every year around the end of November and the beginning of December this same old false rumor rumbles throughout the campus of M.C.C. The rumor, as I'm sure you've guessed, is over the request to end the first semester of school prior to Christmas break.

Here Laura was trying to create a composite implied audience; she was trying to find a way to effectively address an audience made up of teachers, administrators, and fellow students at our college. She ended up projecting onto her readers the perspective of those members of the college community who were growing frustrated with endless talk and no action on the rescheduling of the semester calendar. But the essay as a whole does not sustain this role, and Laura wound up rightly preferring her "Letter" to this essay.

Yet there is evidence that struggling with a more general audience is well worth the effort. In planning the essay that became her "Letter to a Lost Friend," Laura first tried to decide whether to write it in this form or to write it "to people in general." In thinking aloud about this more general perspective, she touched on a more complex understanding of the situation and

a less condescending attitude toward her friend:

> I was thinking if I should write this to her, the person that I'm thinking of or if I should just write it to, more to people in general--just to whoever, that you shouldn't put up false pretenses. But then I would have to go into if people in general accept other people as they are or if just my group of friends does, because I guess a lot of people don't accept people just for what they are. Y'know, it's like you have to fit into their standard or they don't want to associate with you. So I could see why she would feel that she would have to say all that phoney stuff, because of other people.

Yet Laura never included such considerations in writing the piece to the narrower audience. When asked about this, she explained: "When I switched to her, I just--I threw that idea out, because in my mind I had linked it together with writing to people in general. And I just didn't think about putting it in the paper."

This suggests that writing for a more general audience may lead the writer to explore her material more deeply. Writing for a narrower audience may stifle any tendency to achieve new insights or to find more complex integrations of the material at hand. Defining one's audience too narrowly, or prematurely limiting the audience, may preclude the exploration of meaning, the discovery of new meanings and of more complex perspectives. Perhaps the more general the audience is, the more demanding it is in terms of performance--because it more insistently requires that the writer create an implied reader. But it is also more likely to provoke a richer understanding. This is a matter of priorities. If we require our students early in the game to show how rhetorically adept they can be, we may encourage them to narrow their goals and thereby stifle a more significant kind of development. The result may be that they will never learn how to produce thought-provoking prose--or how to write a "poem maybe as cold/And passionate as the dawn."

-Handout

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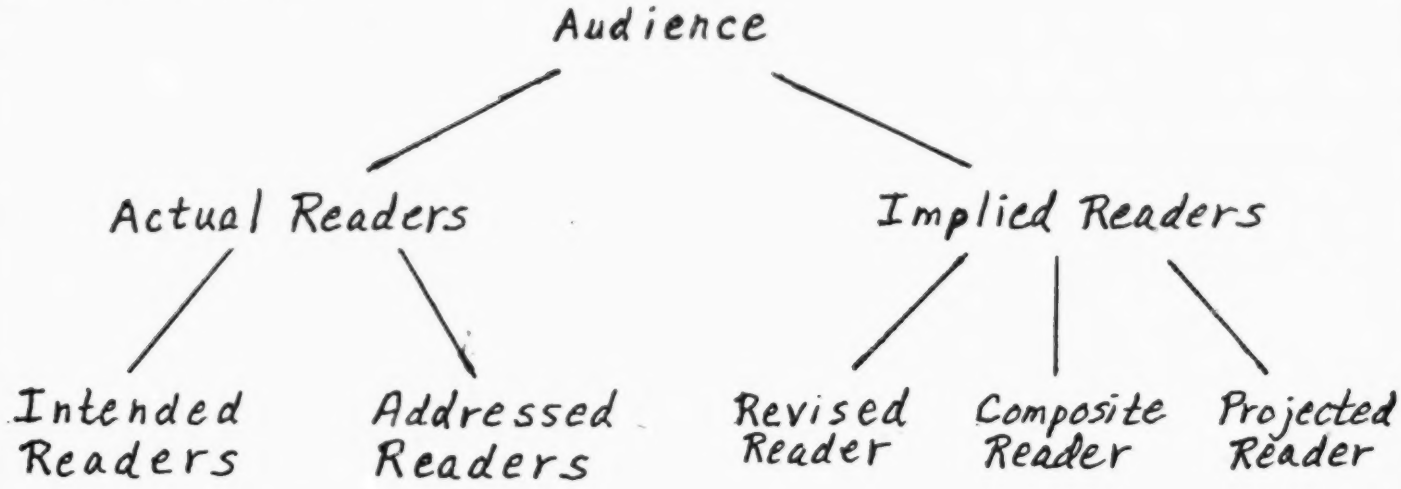
Audiences, Imagined and Real

1. Audience Model



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2. From "The Fisherman"

Maybe a twelvemonth since
Suddenly I began,
In scorn of this audience,
Imagining a man,
And his sun-freckled face,
And grey Connemara cloth,
Climbing up to a place
Where stone is dark under froth,
And the down-turn of his wrist
When the flies drop in the stream;
A man who does not exist,
A man who is but a dream;
And cried, 'Before I am old
I shall have written him one
Poem maybe as cold
And passionate as the dawn.'

--William Butler Yeats

3. Opening of Laura's "Is Next Year Ever Going to Come to MCC?"

"It'll change next year." "I heard next year they're gonna change it." Next year, next year, next year; is next year ever going to come to M.C.C.?

Every year around the end of November and the beginning of December this same old false rumor rumbles throughout the campus of M.C.C. The rumor, as I'm sure you've guessed, is over the request to end the first semester of school prior to Christmas break.

Letter to a Lost Friend

Well, now we've found you out. You feel like a fool and so do we; you for lying and we for believing.

How unnecessary it all was!

We have all been friends for different lengths of time, some of us for all our lives, some for just a few months. People come and go from our little group, but all are accepted for what they are.

We didn't care if you were from the Clive Hills of Edison or the heart of Perth Amboy--why lie?

We didn't care if you were going to Rutgers for your B.A. or working at Revlon--why lie?

We thought it was great for you to be dating "Rich Jerry" and hanging out in his pool or in fancy New York clubs with his rich friends, but those imaginary people didn't make us like you.

If you don't like to wear blue jeans--don't! Most of us find them comfortable, but if you want to be punk or disco--go for it!

If you like to disco and listen to the music, why say you don't? Some of us go to Close Encounters and "punk out" on the weekends, but we still are all friends. As they say, it takes all kinds--and we certainly are!

You're a very nice girl; very bright, and <u>witty</u> for sure! We had great times. You made us laugh. <u>You</u> made us laugh; where you live didn't, your supposedly having a rich boyfriend didn't, and your bluejeans didn't. Now these things do make us laugh; a sorry pitiful laugh.

Sorry that a person felt she had to lie to us to be our friend.

Pitiful that you don't like yourself enough to accept you for what you are.

We understand why you don't come around any more, and we're not asking you to. We just want to say: Next time you meet people, let them really know you as you are. We're sure they'll like what they find.